

Nothing more than serving. Ordinations, Cathedral, 25/11/2017

You know that thing when it's Maundy Thursday and people say *Oh I'm really sorry I can't come to the footwashing service. Honestly, I've got hordes of relatives arriving for Easter. Sorry.*

And then there's a few stalwart Anglicans of great commitment who will loyally show up despite the giant cultural cringe generated by the occasion of footwashing. So you know it's been a case of scouring the heels with Jif in the shower, a quick trip to the podiatrist to ensure that nothing could be deemed unsightly by the nominated footwasher, a quick blast of cologne on the ankles followed by painting the toenails in Lenten Violet just to get into the spirit of the occasion – or is that just me?

What we do to remember and emulate Christ the servant on Maundy Thursday is liturgically appropriate and an important reminder of what we are about, but perhaps it falls short of human reality.

If you have had major surgery then you may well know what it is like to be standing in a shower with a tangle of equipment attached while a nurse you met that morning washes your feet because it's not something that you can do for yourself. The humility of the nurse is real, and so is your experience of being earthly, limited, humbled by your circumstances.

Genuine humility can't be faked, and it can't be earned.

There's a lot of talk in the church about having this ministry or that ministry as though it were some kind of prefect's badge or sign of merit. The most important thing that I can say about being ordained to the Diaconate is that ministry is nothing more than serving – and nothing less. And I don't think that serving a cuppa and doing the dishes afterwards is in any way a lesser ministry than distributing communion or visiting those who are sick or dying.

But I'm afraid there are still those who will say that being a Deacon is a lesser ministry than being a priest and those who are prepared to say so have betrayed their own servanthood by their words. Some of us here today know for certain that they have been called to a life of service and hospitality, interfacing with the community, and not a different journey to

priesthood like others of us. Vocational deacons keep inviting us to pay attention to how we are responding to our communities.

Now I realise that the Liturgical Police will have a warrant out for me when I have the audacity to critique the vows you will say today. They are a product of their heritage and their time, but at least you get to say them in contemporary English. I was ordained under the old 1662 rite, which obliged me to seek out the poor and impotent of Blenheim, and that's no small ask, believe me. Some of you here were probably charged with the same responsibility – we should swap stories sometime.

But seriously, what I draw attention to in these vows is there's no mention of practices that nowadays we emphasise in preparing us to function well and be safe in ministry. You'll note that there's nothing about caring for yourself and your family, and there's nothing about mutuality in ministry, by which I mean How do you ensure that you are flexible enough to be someone who is able to be ministered to when the need arises – someone who can graciously allow the ministries of others to be offered to you.

There are some Christians who become compulsive helpers (likely to be #2 on the Enneagram if you're familiar with that tool), who have simply no idea what it would be like to be among the helped. As one person remarked *God put us on the earth to help others. What the others are here for I have no idea.*

Consider then the importance of flexible status. Whether you're a committed Christian or not, a healthy self-understanding depends on each of us being able to lead when called upon, due to our role or expertise, and to follow when that is important – like deferring to the air crew on a plane when they direct you to fumble for your lifejacket.

Jesus was someone for whom that is evidently true. He was quite comfortable taking high status as a prophet and teacher – cleansing the temple is a perfect example, or perhaps his “You have heard it said... but I say to you” pronouncements. Equally, he did indeed take a towel, and in the lowest status role in the household, washed his disciples' feet and instructed them to do likewise.

But for us it really isn't about feet or our squeamishness about that rite, is

it?

It's about giving God the space to show us where and how we can serve and be served.

And God has given many of us a very simple learning opportunity: service begins at home. My experience is that we learn about serving our family and friends precisely at the point where we really can't be actually bothered – a busy day, an unexpected interruption, crisis or irritation – any of these has the capacity to disclose not just our character but our willingness to be Christlike when we'd rather put our feet up in front of the telly. I think we can be sure that those who know us best have the most insight into our capacity for servanthood.

When I went into hospital I didn't realise I was going to learn a vivid lesson in humility and servanthood. To be fair I was rather more absorbed in grim imaginings of things that can go wrong, at the time.

Anyway, my surgeon was one of the most highly-regarded in Hawkes Bay and a fellow of this world-leading hospital and that. And he visited me every day without fail to check my recovery. But it was the smallest thing that touched me deeply and remains as a lesson to me now. About a week after surgery I was dressed and sitting in a chair waiting to discuss the possibility of going home. The surgeon arrived, pulled up a chair next to me and we chatted about my readiness to be discharged. Having agreed that I was probably ready, he stood up to leave. He spotted my morning-tea tray on the bed and said, kindly, “Here, I'll just bring this over for you so that you don't have to get up.” The most simple of actions and remarks but it revealed the soul of someone with no concern as to what a surgeon might consider to be beneath them.

Shirley Murray captures the essence of servanthood in her carol for Epiphany and beyond: *Who sweeps the stable when Christmas is over? Who clears the table, the crumbs of the meal? Practical people, compassionate people, people not proud, who take basin and kneel.*

We have sung it for so long that it is nearly a cliché but let us not forget to *Pray that I might have the grace to let you be my servant, too.*